



### THE LION OF MARK

Lent Course, St Michael's Cornhill  
 1:45pm Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2016  
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One of the most unusual novels I've ever read is Doris Lessing's early novel, *The Grass is Singing*. It's unusual since the dénouement is there, set out in the first chapter. Yet, despite the fact that you know what's going to happen, you still want to go on reading. . . Equally unusual but almost in reverse, is Evelyn Waugh's great novel, *A Handful of Dust*. Here the ending is not spelt out at all, although it's not difficult to imagine where it intends you to go. Indeed, so terrifying is the original conclusion that Waugh wrote a different version for the American edition.

These two examples – and there are many others – illustrate how crucial the beginning and ending of a story is. Indeed the great English literary critic, Frank Kermode, wrote a monograph titled simply, *The Sense of an Ending*. If beginning and end matter crucially, then Mark the Evangelist did not miss a trick, for the framework which encloses his account is classic on these criteria alone. So much is this so, that this framing gives a clue to the entire character of his gospel.

So, first then, the beginning, how *does* it start? 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet - 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, a voice crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." - John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. . . ' Then just six verses on: 'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee. . . '

So there is, if you like, no messing! We're straight in: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' It's a sort of declaratory announcement. Then from nowhere springs John the Baptist, and almost equally from nowhere (actually Nazareth) but with no more background, we encounter Jesus. There's no preparation, no foreplay, no preface and no prolegomenon as the academics would have it. These intriguing characters appear almost from nowhere. The poet and novelist, Stevie Smith, was so taken by it in Dr. Rieu's Penguin translation, that she was stimulated to write verse. She called her poem *The Airy Christ*.

‘Who is this that comes in splendour, coming from the blazing east?’

This is he we had not thought of, this is he the airy Christ.’

We’ll encounter Stevie’s Christ as we go on – but *there* she captures something of the sense of surprise in Mark’s very spare, austere – even bleak – beginning. But what of the end? This is more extraordinary still.

So extraordinary is Mark’s ending that two other attempts at fuller endings were added at different times by others to give it what they felt would be coherence. Both these endings are now seen as spurious. For the final verse, written by Mark himself, follows the scene of the women arriving at the empty tomb where they are greeted by a young man in white: ‘Do not be amazed,’ he says, ‘Jesus has risen. . . go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. . . And they went and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and *they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*’

It is an extraordinarily *daring* – even *risky* conclusion to a story that has been describing the impact of the Saviour of the World, God incarnate. Why the fear, why the secrecy? If they said nothing to anyone, then how do we know now? The sense of intrigue deepens. Perhaps we should dig a little more deeply. If it is the first gospel ever written, then why did Mark feel constrained to write it in the first place? How do the themes we have already encountered get played out in the narrative? The two themes paramount so far identified seem to be *secrecy* or *mystery* and *fear*.

So why did Mark write? Well, of course, we can only conjecture. After all, Mark wastes no time on introduction and preliminaries, as we saw; he jumps straight in – there are no hints of why he’s writing. However, there *must be a reason* why the impact of Jesus – which appears previously to have been rehearsed only orally – should now be inscribed in written form. My next reflection is purely my own conjecture as any such reflection can be, but it does take into account scholarly opinion.

Most scholars now assume Mark, the shortest, pithiest and fastest moving gospel to have been the earliest, probably appearing around the year AD70. Extrapolating from that assumption, my conclusion is that it came indeed from that very year, for that was year that Titus marched into Jerusalem crushing a local uprising and now establishing Roman rule more directly and oppressively. The situation was terrifying for all and was increasingly unstable. No one could predict the final situation. Nobody and no group was secure. So the embryonic community of those who would give birth to Christianity were equally in peril. Would the message survive? Would the passion ever again be rehearsed on the streets of the Via Dolorosa? So this insecurity demanded a written witness and account which would live for all time. Enter Mark, centre stage, to become what we would now call the first evangelist, the first recorder of the good news.

Historically this would make sense, and the manner of Mark’s writing would equally resonate with it. Let me take you back for a moment to a parallel situation, to the book Daniel in the Old Testament. Daniel is written as if it happened in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Cyrus and Darius in the sixth century BC. But in fact we now know it was written four hundred years later, in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid Emperor, who plundered the Temple and tyrannised the Jewish people. So Daniel wrote, if you like, deliberately in code. He wrote his book to encourage a terrified and oppressed people, but a people who were devout and loyal to the Lord, their God.

So again, in Mark’s gospel, something not dissimilar may be going on. Mark’s tiny community lived in terrifying circumstances. They needed comfort, hope and they needed it to be conveyed with subtlety – even mystery or secrecy – and that indeed is what we encounter again and again, from the very start. Like a shooting star, Jesus appears on the scene:

‘Who is this that comes in splendour, coming from the blazing east?’

This is he we had not thought of, this is he the airy Christ.’

So, just at the end of his first chapter, Mark describes the healing of a leper. All are astonished and Jesus responds: ‘See that *you say nothing to anyone.*’ Even before that, he had ‘commanded the demons’ not to speak, for they knew him, that is, they knew who he was, we are told. Only a little further on, at the beginning of chapter three, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, again on the Sabbath. This time the sequel is more menacing. We read: ‘The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.’ Just two chapters in and Jesus is marked out as a ‘hunted man.’ Jesus mirrors the dangerous world of Mark’s times. The gospel is secret, for it brings danger with it. Jesus, for all his authority and holiness remains a mysterious figure.

In chapter four we encounter a most unexpected incident. Jesus tells the parable of the sower. None of *us* needs to be reminded of it. But the disciples are less clear. They ask Jesus concerning the parables. Now, if you can remember your Sunday School days, you’ll remember the definition of a parable. It was, we were told, ‘an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.’ It was a story that would clarify, give more meaning, let us see a little more clearly, the nature of God.

But when the disciples ask their question, how does Jesus reply? He says, counter-intuitively: ‘To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside *everything is in parables*, so that they may indeed see yet not perceive, and they may indeed hear and not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven.’ It is a most perplexing piece. The parables are, says Jesus, the very opposite of what I was taught at Sunday School. In other words, they are there to obfuscate, to cloud things in mystery just in case otherwise people might understand and be forgiven! *Those outside* may have been the brutal persecutors of Mark’s day.

But this mystery runs very deep. Let’s gallop along a little in the gospel or you may think we are to be here forever! Chapter eight’s a good stopping point. Jesus has just fed the 4,000. The disciples, with Jesus, have just set off afterwards across the Sea of Galilee in a boat and they had forgotten to bring bread for their meal later on. Jesus then says ‘Beware of the leaven, the *yeast* of the Pharisees and Herodians’ – we’ve already seen their enmity! The disciples think it’s about forgetting the bread. But Jesus says they’ve missed the point: ‘Do you not yet understand?’ He asks how many baskets full of loaves and fishes they collected. They reply with some precision – twelve and eight. But the disciples are still mystified – the incident concludes with Jesus asking: ‘Do you not yet understand?’ Of course, they *didn’t* and nor has anyone else in the 2,000 years that have followed!

Indeed, the disciples in Mark are the group most likely to get it wrong, to misunderstand, Peter pre-eminently and culminating, of course, in the tragedy of his threefold denial of Jesus. Mark’s is the first account of that denial which appears in all *four* gospels - even in that of John. Stevie Smith articulates some of this with the image of Jesus singing his song:

‘As he knows the words he sings, that he sings so happily  
Must be changed to working laws, yet sings he ceaselessly.

Those who truly hear the voice, the words, the happy song,  
Never shall need working laws to keep from doing wrong.

Deaf men will pretend sometimes they hear the song, the words  
And make excuse to sin extremely; this will be absurd.’

Nonetheless the gospel moves on relentlessly and swiftly towards its inevitable conclusion. Jesus is hunted continuously and, again and again, he charges his hearers to tell no one what they have heard or seen. Finally we reach the events of Holy Week very swiftly, for Mark’s is by far the most terse account of all the gospels.

The passion itself contains its own resonant sense of tragedy but also too a prevailing sense of mystery. On the way to the cross, we encounter the desolation of Gethsemane and then the brutality of Jesus' arrest, trial and journey to the scaffold. We meet Simon of Cyrene, son of Alexander and Rufus, but we have no notion of who all these are – so more mystery still! We encounter too a young man who follows Jesus wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seize him but he leaves the linen cloth and runs away naked. The word Mark uses for this cloth *syndon* appears but twice in the New Testament and the next occasion is after the crucifixion, where Mark uses it again, this time for the linen cloth in which they wrap Jesus for his burial.

Back to Stevie

'Heed it not. Whatever foolish men may do the song is cried for those to hear,  
And the sweet singer does not care that he was crucified.

For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything,  
Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.'

Mark probably inherited much of the passion narrative from that which had hitherto been rehearsed along the Via Dolorosa perhaps for a yearly, or even more likely weekly remembering of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection in Jerusalem itself. Mark as I've hinted gives the passion his own trademarks: it is terse, the relentless pursuit of Jesus to his death continues; the mystery surrounding Jesus and these events is still there.

So, then, we come full circle to Mark's framing of his entire gospel. We're back to that unbelievably daring and risky ending. The women come to the tomb. They find the stone rolled away. They are greeted by a young man in a white robe – this time it's not the flimsy linen cloth – it's a shining white raiment, marked we assume by the holiness of God encountered in his messenger. The young man sends them as missionaries to Galilee – but '*they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*'

Robert Frost, perhaps, the most accomplished of all North American nature poets, wrote a verse which concluded with these words:

'I have kept hidden in the instep arch  
Of an old cedar at the waterside  
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail  
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it  
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.'

This captures Mark perfectly. It's written out of suffering, confusion and desolation. It's there to nourish a harrowed community. Jesus suffers but is vindicated, but we're given no encounter with him post-Resurrection. The world of Mark remains still too tough, too tyrannous, too confused for that. God still often feels distant, caught in mystery. The riddle-like nature of life in God – there in the Old Testament too - is captured by Mark's Jesus.

It's not too distant in some ways from our present world, fragmented, confused, uncertain of who we are, uncertain of human destiny. So maybe of all the gospels Mark is the gospel for our age. Robert Frost's final lines of his verse offer just a little clearing of the mist:

'(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)  
Here are your waters and your watering place.  
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion,'

